

Open Letter to the Third International

• by Hayim Greenberg

I BELIEVE that this is the first time that a man of my political persuasion is addressing you directly in an open letter. I know that I have no grounds for optimism in regard to the probable effect of my communication on your views and position. Nevertheless I cannot free myself from the faith which has been mine all my life, that no outcry in the universe is wholly lost, that though apparently unheeded it registers somewhere, somehow. And I write to you now in this belief that no protest against injustice is ever senseless.

I shall deal with the grave accusation that thousands, perhaps millions, of Jews have made against you because of your attitude towards the drama one act of which is now unfolding in Palestine. I have received no mandate from these masses but I am certain that I express a widespread sense of pain and astonishment.

What is the accusation?

No one can accuse you of enmity or indifference towards the national liberation movements of our time. You have never suffered from the superstition of "cosmopolitanism", and you have more than once stated your conviction that the satisfaction of legitimate national aspirations is the prerequisite of a true internationalism. You oppose the crushing of any national group by a stronger one, even though the group in question be without a "history" in the accepted sense, or even the rudiments of a national culture. Tchukches and Mordvines, peoples whose names are unknown in the Western hemisphere save to students, have been accorded the status of recognized nations by Soviet Russia. I do not believe that Stalin's formula—"socialist in content and national in form" bears logical dissection because form and content are as indissoluble in national

culture as they are in painting or music. However, an unsuccessful formula may sometimes enable a successful pursuit of a wise policy.

Speaking more specifically of the Jewish question, no one can accuse you of anti-Semitism. It would be better perhaps if you did not occasionally betray the bad taste of boasting that under the Soviet regime no pogroms occur and that anti-Semitism is energetically fought. The fact that an anti-Semitic government cannot be classed among civilized nations does not mean that a "philo-Semitic" one should claim an order of special merit. Nevertheless, leaving aside fine points of taste, no one can charge you either with that peculiar form of ultra-friendliness which holds that the Jews are fine fellows and should therefore lose their identity in a general amalgam. The Soviet regime has limitations which I do not propose to discuss now, but within the confines of the measure of liberty possible in Russia, Jews have received the maximum opportunities for national existence and national development. You have gone even further. You are giving a symbolic demonstration of the fact that the Jews are a nation and have a right to national existence by your attempted creation of a Jewish republic in Biro-Bidjan. By this alone you have subscribed to our old Zionist contention that the *national* problems of Jews cannot be solved without a Jewish territory. Obviously you recognize the right of the Jewish people to a territorial center. But you have announced more than once (through President Kalinin and the declarations of the Komzet) that the colonization of Biro-Bidjan must not be considered as a "new Zionism" and that the autonomous region in Biro-Bidjan must not be viewed as a "new Zion" for world-Jewry. Through these warnings you have left unsolved

the question of a more extensive territorial center, suitable for the six-sevenths of the Jewish people who live outside the Soviet Union. Russia does not propose to fling open her doors to mass-immigration. As far as Biro-Bidjan is concerned, the Russian official press has made it clear that only small numbers of foreign Jews would be permitted to enter, chiefly in cases of a shortage of given categories of qualified workers among Soviet Jews. By this I wish to state that neither you nor the Soviet Government (I hope you will not take amiss my identification of you with the Soviet Government without further diplomatic hocus-pocus) have set up Biro-Bidjan as a rival to Palestine. You have not declared that a Jewish territorial center should be created not in Palestine, but in Biro-Bidjan; you have not said that the millions of Jews from various countries who need a national territory should go to Biro-Bidjan instead of Palestine. Up to date you have offered to develop Jewish colonization in Biro-Bidjan till it can be proclaimed a Jewish republic. I do not recall off-hand how large the population of a region must be before, according to Russian constitution, it can receive the status of a republic. I do remember, however, that the Soviet Union contains many republics whose population is negligible: the Abkhazian republic, proclaimed in 1921, had at the time, no more than 200,000 inhabitants; the Adzharian republic, established in the same year, had no more than 131,000; the Nakhichevan Republic established in 1923, had a population of only 104,000. I am pointing out that you can fulfill your promise to create a Jewish republic merely by bringing a trifling number of the sixteen million Jews in the world, into Biro-Bidjan. This of course would still leave the Jewish territorial problem unsolved. Millions of Jews have directly or indirectly shown their Zionist will by their participation in various Palestinian activities. However, instead of welcoming the revival of creative energy in an ancient, martyred people, you are doing all in your power, morally and politically, to discredit and injure this extraordinary national emancipation movement. Far though you be from anti-Semitism, you actually serve an anti-Semitic purpose by hindering the reconstruction of our people.

I know how you answer accusations of this kind: The national emancipation of one people must not be achieved at the expense of another people. Zionism, you claim, builds Jewish weal on Arab woe. Were that really so, were Zionism to be achieved through the destruction and exploitation of the Arabs, not only every communist and socialist, but every decent man would be obliged to fight it as an unforgivable form of national egoism. But the time has come for you to revise your conception of Zionism as well as to analyze

critically some of the deductions you have drawn from principles correct in themselves.

One people may exploit another economically, culturally and politically. The most vicious form of exploitation is the economic because both the cultural and political status of a people depend in a large measure on its economic condition. The first question in our controversy therefore, is whether the Arabs of Palestine are being exploited economically by the Jewish settlers and the Zionist movement.

I have good reason to be weary of this particular theme. One grows tired of endlessly answering a libel which some spread through malice and others believe through ignorance and intellectual apathy. Possibly you will never free yourselves of your misconception of the economic role of the Jew in Palestine until you send a delegation (consisting not of party politicians but of experts in economics, your experienced "sovnarkhos" men) to study the situation on the spot. I propose this plan in all seriousness, and I should like to take the liberty of making two concrete suggestions; first, acquaint yourselves with the data of the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations in regard to the mythological "displaced Arabs" (if you consider the available information at Geneva insufficient, Russia's representative at the League of Nations will easily be able to secure a new investigation); secondly; send a delegation to Palestine. I have reason to believe that both the government and the Jewish Agency would assist the delegation in its investigation, though I cannot guarantee the attitude of the Arab leaders towards a Bolshevik Commission despite your pro-Arab policies. In the meantime, I think it will be enough for me to mention a few of the grosser fictions in the legend of the Jew's economic exploitation of the Arab.

First of all, let me remind you that the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population of Palestine consists of laboring elements. Zionism liberates the modern Jew from the curse which has pursued him for centuries in the diaspora—the curse of unproductive occupations. You know what difficulties the Soviets encountered because of the peculiar, one-sided economic life of the Russian Jew, a life ill-suited to a workers' society. In most European countries with a large Jewish population the Jews have a very limited scope of functions in the economic structure of the country. In Poland, for instance, 65% of all the tradesmen are Jews; in Lithuania, 77%; in Hungary where Jews are only 5% of the population, they form 50% of the merchants. This situation is the inevitable result of the restrictions and quotas placed on Jews in practically every form of employment and profession. Outside of Soviet-Russia where, thanks to the revolution, Jews have be-

come economically re-classified, Palestine is the only place where, *due to an inner revolution*. Jews are developing without those social-economic anomalies to which history has doomed them. The Jewish population of Palestine is proportionately larger than that of any other country, but only 33% of the traders are Jews, whereas the majority of the Jewish population is engaged in agriculture, manual labor, industry and the professions. Jewish immigration of the last fifteen years consists primarily of workers; it has none of the earmarks characteristic of imperialist invasion of colonial lords. The occupational distribution of the Jewish settlers in itself makes the charge of exploitation absurd. Furthermore, if one compares conditions in Palestine with those in Syria, one realizes what the economic influence of Jewish immigration has been. Thanks to the Histadrut, the eight hour day has been introduced into numerous enterprises in Palestine, whereas in Syria the 12 hour day is still in force. If one compares conditions in industries that exist in both neighboring countries, one is startled by the difference in wages. In the Syrian shoe-industry the unskilled worker gets 50 to 90 mils and the skilled worker from 100 to 150 mils per day, whereas in Palestine the unskilled worker gets 100 to 150 mils and the skilled worker 300 to 400 mils per day. In the silk industry a Syrian worker gets 60 to 80 mils per day, a Palestinian 400 to 500 mils. In the macaroni factories a Syrian male worker gets 80 to 100 mils a day, and a woman as little as 30 to 40 mils whereas in Palestine men get 300 mils per day and women 200 to 250 mils. These figures, only a small part of similar statistical data which I could furnish you, speak for themselves; such victories for the working class would be impossible if Jews came to Palestine as exploiters, or if Jewish workers strove to "capture" work from the Arab or to "underlive" him. It is true that the average Jew in Palestine lives better than the average Arab, but is a higher degree of economic well-being always a sign of exploitation? You have now in Soviet-Russia some workers barely able to get necessities, while others ride around in their own automobiles. Are you prepared to admit that one group of workers exploits another in the socialist fatherland? Your explanation is that one group is more capable, more energetic and more productive than the other. It is not our fault that a Jewish hen lays an average of 150 eggs, annually, whereas an Arab one lays no more than 80; nor are we to blame because a Jewish cow gives an average of 4000 litres of milk annually, while an Arab cow produces not more than 700. The Jewish pioneers responsible for these economic "crimes" deserve awards rather than abuse. Jonathan Swift must have had such pioneers in mind when he wrote:

"Whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together."

Since the Jews do not keep their knowledge secret — an esoteric mystery to be shared with none—Arab farmers are gradually learning modern methods. Judging from their present rate of adaptation they may attain a high degree of economic development within our generation.

The growth of population is a significant index to economic conditions. Before the war there were not more than 600,000 Arabs in Palestine. This number remained static for the fifty years preceding the World War. To-day, there are about 900,000 Arabs. This means that the Arab population increased by 50% in the very years of intensive Jewish immigration. True, the addition of 300,000 was not due solely to the rate of national increase (excess of births over deaths) but also to Arab immigration from adjacent countries, but the very fact that Arab emigration from Palestine has decreased while Arab immigration into Palestine has greatly increased—it would perhaps be truer to say has begun—demonstrates the economic value of Zionist colonization to the country in general and the Arabs in particular. It is no accident that in the very midst of the present tragic occurrences in Palestine the Grand Mufti's party has come out for a mass-immigration of Arabs from other Arab countries which are much larger in circumference and much more thinly populated. This approval is being made at a time when the cry is raised that Jewish immigration be stopped, a cry in which your press joins presumably on the grounds that Palestine is "over-populated." It is a little hard to reconcile these circumstances. Apparently "over-population" is a relative term depending on who is to do the populating. In antiquity nearly five million people lived in Palestine on both sides of the Jordan. Today there is still room for millions of new immigrants. The demand to stop Jewish immigration and prohibit the sale of land to Jews (a "reform" through which some Russian Czars won eternal fame) is motivated not by economic, but by purely political considerations.

I shall be able to pass quickly to the political phase of the question, because, fortunately, no one charges us with cultural exploitation. No one dares to accuse Zionism of degrading the cultural standard of the Arab population. Everyone recognizes that the immigration of elements with a higher cultural level stimulates the original creative energy of the Arab. No Arab will claim that there were better Arab schools, or a more highly developed Arab press before the "Zionist

invasion." Our bitterest enemy will not accuse us of attempting to Hebraize the Arabs, or of interfering in any way with their cultural development. On the contrary, if there is any academic institution seriously devoted to the study of Arab history and philology, it is the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which receives assistance neither from the Arabs, nor from the government, but is open to Arabs, Christians, and foreigners from all lands. I shall dwell no longer on the question of cultural exploitation because in this respect, at least, no one has as yet accused us of "poisoning the wells."

The only charge which has some shadow of justification—true, of a purely forward and superficial character—is the political one. Honest Arab leaders are prepared to admit that Zionism constitutes no cultural or economic danger for the Arabs (communists in Moscow and Catholics in the Vatican talk more about economic exploitation than do the Arabs in Palestine.) However, they claim that we represent a serious political menace, because unless Jewish immigration is stopped we will soon become a majority in the country and the land will lose its "Arab" character. One must agree that there is considerable truth in this argument. We are convinced that Palestine, if properly developed through intensive agriculture and industry has room for many more millions, and that these millions, unless artificially checked, will be Jews. No other people has the devotion or the will for the reconstruction of the country to make mass-immigration possible. This means that in the course of time the Jews will become a majority, even though the number of Arabs will not decrease, but will increase much more rapidly than before Zionism. Nationalist Arabs and international communists believe that this means "seizing a country" from its rightful owners, that this is imperialism.

Yet this charge of Zionist imperialism, which you advance so often, is in its essence a discrimination against Jews. You do not realize how anti-Semitic it is objectively, though not subjectively or consciously. Assuming the status of a national minority to be less than ideal, you are prepared to let the Jews be a minority in every country, but the Arabs not in a single land. Remember that you yourselves do not consider the Palestinian Arabs as a separate national entity; you view them as a part of a larger nation. Therefore your proclamations demand the union of all Arab countries into a larger national federation. You know very well that the Arab nation branches out over a large area. Even if we exclude the Arab-speaking lands of North Africa—Syria, Mesopotamia and Sandi-Arabia still occupy approximately 615,000 square miles (that is somewhat more than France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Czechoslovakia,

Denmark and Holland put together). Palestine, on the other hand, together with Transjordan, is only 26,000 square miles in area — less than 1/23 of all the land under Arab rule. You know this geographical fact as well as we do, but the deductions that you make resemble Hottentot rather than socialist morality: your conclusion seems to be that 22/23 are not enough for 10 to 12 million Arabs, but 1/23 is too much for 16 million Jews, and, finally, that Arabs must not be a minority anywhere, the Jews everywhere.

I don't know what will happen in the distant future. Possibly the dream of a central-European reformer (Bluntschli) will come true, and the world's population will be so regrouped that there will no longer be national minorities. For the present, national minorities cannot be avoided. Millions of Russians live outside of Russia—they live in the Ukraine, in White Russia, in Turkestan and outside the Soviet Union as national minorities. Millions of Germans live in Czechoslovakia, in Hungary, in Rumania, in Russia and in the United States. Millions of Italians, Magyars and other peoples have been incorporated as minorities in larger national organisms. But when the Arabs are involved you consider it an imperialistic crime to place a small number of them in the position of a national minority in a comparatively small area of land—even though this should be done in the interests of the most completely homeless and landless people in the world. Unless my information is wrong, the recently deceased Henry Barbusse put the same question to you in a letter which he sent you in the last months of his illness. His death freed you from the necessity of answering his charge that your attitude towards Zionism was the contrary of communist principles and of true internationalism, that it was motivated by a dubious political opportunism, rather than by socialist ideology. But has not the time come for you to give yourselves a conscientious answer?

And may I ask, whether within the Soviet Union you have always practiced the theory which you wish to apply to Arab-Jewish relations? Because of weighty political considerations which I need not discuss now, I know that in 1924 you founded a Moldavian Republic in South Ukraine with Balta as capital. The Moldavians happen to be a minority in that region, and the Ukrainians a majority. Why was your adherence to the principle of majorities in this case, and why did you give preference to the minority? Was it not because Ukrainian nationalism could find free scope in a comparatively large territory, while Moldavian nationalism had only this small corner of Ukraine in which to express itself? May I point out still another fact? Several years before the Biro-Bidjan project hove into view, you planned to trans-

form Crimea into a Soviet-Jewish territory. (Our Jewish communists in America once nurtured the same tender patriotism for Crimea that they now do for Biro-Bidjan.) The Soviet government even negotiated with representatives of the American Jewish bourgeoisie in regard to financing the Crimean project. Was Crimea uninhabited at that time? Did not a non-Jewish majority of several hundred thousand live there? Were not the Tartars the most considerable national group in that region? In other words, did not Crimea have its Arabs? Nevertheless President Kalinin permitted himself the optimistic prophecy that should Jewish colonization develop at a sufficiently rapid tempo, the time would come when the Sea of Azof would be called the "Jewish Sea."

There even appeared Russian historians who unearthed the fact that blooming Jewish communities had existed in Crimea in ancient times. They were delighted to remember that in the early centuries of the Christian Era, Hellenized Jews had come together with Greeks on the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azof, and that as late as the eighth century, the city of Phanagoria on the peninsula of Taman was practically a Jewish city. These excursions into history were to demonstrate the Jewish "historic right" to the region of Crimea. I do not quite understand why the Soviet government gave up the Crimea project so quickly. However, its place was eventually taken by Biro-Bidjan. Yet Biro-Bidjan, after a number of years of Jewish colonization still has its non-Jewish majority. Have you ever inquired whether this majority is willing to become a minority? Did you hold a referendum in regard to the right of the Jews to colonize there? Did the Jews receive an invitation from the non-Jews of Biro-Bidjan?

I ask these questions because I wish you to consider a geographic fact with which we Jews must reckon and which you cannot possibly ignore. On the whole globe there is no corner which is wholly uninhabited, which has not its "majority", its "Arabs." Wherever Jews may now go to build a national center, no matter how large or uncultivated the land may be, they will always find inhabitants with no enthusiasm for being transformed into a minority. Even Greenland has a population of 16,000 with "historic rights". Should a hundred Jewish immigrants arrive there with the intention of bringing over thousands of others—assuming that the absorptive capacity of the country permitted — the Greelanders would probably soon raise the cry of "Zionist imperialist invasion". True, there is a difference between the population in Biro-Bidjan, or Greenland, and the Arabs. Arabs are a *historic* people, whereas the others are not. But I should not care to hear such an answer from you, because that would mean that

you give premiums for *historicity* and penalties for *non-historicity*, that you make distinctions between higher races whose rights must be respected and lower races which may be injured. No, such an explanation would be motivated not by ethics, but by convenience. It is not more just, but simply easier to exploit an "unhistoric people". It is the exploiter's line of least resistance.

The situation is such that you can approach the Jewish national problem in only one of two ways. You can tell us—if you have the temerity: "You have come too late. The world has already been parcelled out. Every people has its place and every place its people. Do what you will — go under, commit national suicide, jump into the sea,—there is no share for you."

If you do not say this, if you dare not say it, if you recognize our right to a national life and the importance of a territorial center for the normalization of our existence, then you must come to another conclusion. You must admit that a people which owns a number of large territories and does not cultivate all of the soil at its disposal, is duty-bound to permit Jewish national colonization even though that should mean a Jewish majority. You must realize that the principle of national equality demands that Jews be not hindered in their attempt to reconstruct a national center in a land which represents 1/23 of the total area which Arabs hold, as national territory. I need not point out to you which of these two conclusions is truer to the spirit of socialism and internationalism. Until you change your fundamentally false attitude towards Zionism, I shall charge you with supporting a narrow, greedy Arab nationalism at the expense of the most elementary rights of the Jewish people.

I have grave and difficult differences with communism. But no matter how deep the division between us—in regard to your means, not to your goal—I should not want the objective historian of the future to write: "Jews finally rebuilt their national center in Palestine, despite the enmity of Arab chauvinists, despite the propaganda of Hitler and Italian fascism, despite the duplicity of British imperialism and the intrigues of the Vatican, and despite the criminal headlessness with which the Communist International supported these reactionary forces."

Marx has a great utterance familiar to everyone: "From each according to his means, to each according to his need." These words represent the new ethical concept which socialism offers the world. This principle guides your reorganization of economic order, and your view of the relations between individuals. It is no less valid for determining the rights of nations. You, as socialists, should be the last to claim that formal or physical possession whether for use or abuse, constitutes

a moral title of ownership. You do not recognize the rights of an idle heiress to squander a fortune which she has not earned. Such social outrage seems to you the dark remnant of a barbaric economic order. Similarly no nation has the right to place "no-trespassing" signs around lands which it does not use, around soil which goes to waste. The draining of a marsh by a Jewish pioneer makes more room for Arabs as well as Jews. There is no question of dispossessing the Palestinian Arab. His numbers will continue to grow,

as they have grown, thanks to the economic enlargement of the country resulting from Jewish colonization. Nor are his interests in any way injured by the still greater increase of the Jewish population in accordance with the absorptive capacity of the country. Or do you really believe that the perpetuation of barren Arab marsh and desert represents a higher social equity than the transformation of this waste into fields cultivated by Arabs and Jews according to their means, and used according to their needs?